

**THE LATE CHARLES HAMILTON FRENCH**

By E. E. PESCOTT

Charles French, Junior, as we knew him, was born at South Yarra in June, 1868, and died in July, 1950, after a long residence at Canterbury. (See note in *Vict. Nat.*, Aug. 1950, p. 76), his wife having predeceased him in April, 1949. He was a son of our founder, Charles French the First, from

**CHARLES FRENCH, JNR.**

An informal snapshot, at Frankston, 1945.

Photo. by courtesy *Wild Life*.

whom he inherited his natural history instincts. He was a born naturalist, with an amazing general knowledge of Australian plants, birds, reptiles, insects, aboriginal artefacts, etc.—all came under his purview.

After leaving school, Charles French, Jr., entered the office of Mr. Patey, a solicitor in Collins Street; and also a Life Member of this Club. Later he worked for Dr. Blair of Collins Street. But natural history was ever before him and he soon found more congenial employment on the staff of the National Herbarium (then called the "Phytologic Museum of Melbourne") as a junior assistant under Baron von Mueller; his brother George also went to work there as Mueller's messenger.

A good all-round knowledge of botany had been acquired from his father, who was formerly Mueller's label writer and classifier of plants at the Botanic Gardens, and young Charles always willingly helped his father in this work. While at the Gardens, the French father became a keen student of entomology and quite early made a fine collection of insect specimens.

Charles Jr. assisted the Baron for 13 years and during that period (until the latter's death in 1896) he travelled in almost every portion of the Colony, always making extensive collections for the Herbarium. He also brought back many entomological specimens for his father and so amassed a store of information in this science. Indeed, whatever he saw that might interest some specialist, he put it in his bag, making his friends—particularly those in the Club—very happy.

Later, Charles Sr. was appointed Government Entomologist (1889) and part of his work was to administer the newly passed Vegetation Diseases Act. Charles Jr. was appointed the first inspector, later to become, as the work extended, Assistant Government Entomologist. Upon the retirement of his father (1908) he in turn became Government Entomologist and some years afterwards, when his great friend, the late C. C. Brittlebank, retired, he was promoted to Biologist in the Department of Agriculture—a position he held until 1933, when he retired full of honour and respect.

In the pre-Club days—and I have referred to this before (see *Vic. Nat.*, May, 1940, p. 4)—regular Sunday meetings of half-a-dozen naturalists would take place at the South Yarra home in Anderson Street, and these enthusiasts would tell tales of their last week's collecting. The boy Charles was always present, absorbing what he could, and when a meeting to discuss the formation of a Naturalists' Club was held, he was there too. He accompanied his father to the first meeting of our Club, held at the Melbourne Athenaeum on May 17th, 1880 (*Southern Science Record*, I, p. 11, Dec., 1880), but was not allowed to join at once, since his father thought him too young; so he did not have the honour of becoming an original member. After joining up in July, 1883, he remained faithful right to the end, being worthily elected to Honorary Membership in August, 1937.

During his Herbarium days he was a staunch personal friend of the great Baron, who affectionately called him "Sharley", and "Sharley" had many fond and amusing tales to tell about the Baron, his work and idiosyncrasies. The young assistant had a flair for remembering scientific names and in this regard could rarely be "floored". In addition, his extensive travelling brought him in demand. On one occasion Professor Baldwin Spencer asked him to keep a look-out for aboriginal mounds in the north of the State. Having seen some, Charley went back there and, after some days' digging, brought two dozen skulls, other bones and about 50 stone axes to the Melbourne Museum.

He was particularly helpful to me in my orchid collecting. On many occasions we tramped the hush to orchid localities, and he never failed to spy out what we were looking for—except once. We were the only collectors who knew of a fine patch of that rare and lovely bluish-green Sun-orchid, *Thelymitra epipactoides*—in the heaths at Cheltenham. Unfortunately, he had shown this patch to a friend, and next year there were none left. The

"friend" had returned, carefully marked the plants, and come back later to dig up all the tubers, which were sold to someone in England!

Charles wrote little. His few notes in the *Victorian Naturalist* were mainly on orchid localities and on native insects that had become pests, but in February and March, 1943, he contributed a series of entertaining reminiscences, "Tales told in Club." His information was mostly distributed in letters and in personal talks; but he always gave it very freely and happily. For a number of years he lectured on Entomology to agricultural students at the Melbourne University and also at the Burnley School of Horticulture. Since his retirement 17 years ago he had undertaken the naming of many mounted botanical collections sent in by country schools to the State Schools' Nursery, Oakleigh; doubtful specimens were always referred to the National Herbarium for identification. He found much pleasure in tending several glasshouses where orchids and begonias grew; choice fuchsias, roses and new tea-tree hybrids were also among the many flowers that flourished in his garden at Dudley Parade, Canterbury.

He provided numerous collectings for the Waite Agricultural Institute, South Australia. Large numbers of plant specimens went from time to time to our National Herbarium, where his books and magazines were recently donated by the family. Some of his earliest orchid and fungal specimens were accompanied by life-like sketches in colour.

I first met Charley French in 1899. Kindred interests made us pals at once, the friendship deepening as the years passed. And now, after a wonderfully full life, he has gone; but we shall remember him as everybody's comrade and the enemy of none. I am grateful for the privilege of paying this tribute—that of an old friend.

#### PLOVER'S UNUSUAL NESTING SITE

Early in June I noticed that a Spur-winged Plover had nested beside the railway track, between Miram and Kaniva on the main line to Adelaide. The site selected for a nest was only about 5 feet from the rails. There were four eggs in the nest. Every time a train approached, no matter at what hour, the plover would be facing it. When the train was about 50 yards away, the mother bird would stand erect over the nest, with outstretched wings and head thrust forward facing the engine. As the train roared past, she would turn around in order still to face the engine. She did not appear to worry about trucks or carriages—only engines. Then she would settle down, as much as to say, "Well, I got rid of *that* one." About the first week in July, this brave bird had disappeared, presumably the eggs had hatched and the young birds gone. Is this early for a plover to nest? The spot chosen was certainly a strange one.

—E. T. MUIR.

#### TREE PLANTING

The Forests Commission of Victoria has published a useful bulletin "The Selection, Propagation and Planting of Trees in the Country Districts of Victoria" which should be of special interest to members of the Club interested in planting their own properties or in connection with the Club's group planting activities. Native and exotic trees and some shrubs are classified in relation to their suitability for the different rainfall zones of the State, together with a good non-technical description of many species. Practical hints on propagation and planting are included. The booklet may be obtained for 1/- from the Commission's Head Office, Public Buildings, Treasury Place, Melbourne.

The "Save the Forests Campaign Council" of which the Club is a constituent member, also has a number of free leaflets on tree-raising from seed, planting and after care, including one on tree growing in dry areas. These may be had at the Council's office, Temple Court, 422 Collins Street, Melbourne.

—G.N.H.